# Chekist Ideology

The East German secret police relied on a specific form of Marxist-Leninist ideology, which in retrospect can be described as **"Chekism."**

The Ministry for State Security (MfS) thus constructed a normative framework whose core concept was the invocation of the Soviet secret police Cheka (or ČK – Russian: Extraordinary All-Russian Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution, *Speculation* and Sabotage), founded by the Bolsheviks in 1917.

From this, the Stasi derived a catalog of
- functions,
- self-descriptions, and
- behavioral guidelines

for its employees.

The term appeared in the Stasi's vocabulary both as a designation for its employees (**"Chekists"**) and as a derived adjective (**"Chekist"**).

Elements of **"Chekist"** ideology included:

- the legitimation as an organ of the **"dictatorship of the proletariat"** and
- the associated justification of violence and repression as a means of class struggle
  - to achieve the historically **"lawful"** victory of socialism over imperialism;
- the justification of the structurally unlimited range of intelligence and secret police methods
  - such as espionage, denunciation, persecution, killing, etc.
    - as necessary acts of **"humanism"**;
- the subordination to the Communist Party as its **"shield and sword"**;
- the classification of their own activities under the umbrella of the **"internationalist"** mission led by the Soviet Union,
  - beginning with the fight against opponents of the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution of 1917;
- the cultivation and communication of an enemy image of **"imperialism"** for the perception of intra-societal and interstate conflict situations;
- the propagation of a profession-specific set of values in which the MfS employees saw themselves as
  - an anti-intellectual, militant vanguard of action with **"proletarian instinct"**:
  - "Chekists are characterized by the fact that they possess that **'6th sense'** which enables them to recognize and track down the enemies" (Erich Mielke 1957).

From this ideology arose the normative ideal of the **"Chekist personality"** for the formation and *psychological-moral* orientation of MfS employees as ideological warriors.

At its core were the **"deep feelings of hatred, disgust, aversion, and relentlessness"** as the **"decisive basis for the passionate and irreconcilable struggle against the enemy."**

In addition, there were soldierly virtues such as
- *unconditional* commitment,
- toughness,
- steadfastness,
- courage and
- willingness to sacrifice, and

intelligence skills such as the ability to conspire and to *embody operational legends*, which were linked to the masculine culture of combat and violence from the era of civil wars in the first half of the 20th century.

This combination of
- passion,
- adherence to principles, and
- toughness

was personified in the cult-like glorification of the ascetic-revolutionary Cheka chairman, Felix Dzerzhinsky (1877–1926), whose (unsubstantiated) quote, **"Only a person with a cool head, a hot heart, and clean hands can be a Chekist,"** was probably the most frequently quoted formula of **"Chekist"** ideology.
It served to instill **"conscious discipline."**

At the same time, this cult served as a normative counterweight to the everyday culture of the secret security bureaucracy, in which the elitist self-image of the **"comrades of the first category"** (Wilhelm Zaisser 1953) was reflected in a mixture of
- power consciousness,
- privilege economy and
- a tendency towards periodic alcohol excesses.

Historically, the **"Chekist"** ideology was
the foundation of the Stasi's internal constitution from its very beginnings, but
it only gained significance as an explicit guiding principle
following the half-hearted de-Stalinization after 1956,
when Stalin and his maxims, such as
the **"constant intensification of the class struggle,"** could no longer be used.

The Dzerzhinsky renaissance that accompanied this development in the Soviet Union led to a public reevaluation of Dzerzhinsky in East Germany, culminating in the celebrations marking the 100th anniversary of his birth in 1977.

*Until the beginning of critical debates* on the Soviet Union's past *in 1985/86*,
the Cheka cult,
alongside the Stasi's work on the tradition of *communist antifascism*,
continued to gain importance.

Both served as a substitute for the fading sense of purpose among Stasi employees,
who lacked personal experience of combat and
had to cope with the gradual erosion of their **"extraordinary"** legitimacy
in daily persecution practices
(decreasing sentences, prisoner ransoms, Western media operating from East Germany, etc.).

In their attempts to salvage and justify themselves during and after the autumn of 1989,
the SED / PDS and the Stasi leadership quickly distanced themselves from **"Chekist"** ideology.

Attempts to establish a de-Stalinized **"clean Chekism"** remained the exception.

It was replaced by a statism that legitimized the Stasi as an element of **"normal"** statehood.

Literature

Gieseke, Jens: The full-time employees of the State Security. Personnel structure and life world 1950–1989/90. Berlin 2000;

Gieseke, Jens: The weakened Chekism. The MfS and the failed suppression of the counter-revolution of 1989/90. In: Sabrow, Martin ( ed. ): 1989 and the role of violence. Göttingen 2012, pp. 56–81.